



Investments by Calvariam Hedum

Category: Half-Life, Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Mystery, Supernatural

Language: English

Characters: A. Shephard, G-Man, Will B.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-04-12 19:10:07

Updated: 2017-04-27 15:08:16

Packaged: 2019-12-12 03:35:24

Rating: K+

Chapters: 2

Words: 7,330

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: "I admit, I have a fascination with those who adapt and survive against all odds..."

1. Part 1

Please go away.

Will Byers stood completely motionless as he stared at the door in front of him, not even daring to take a breath.

Please go away.

He heard its plodding footsteps as it came stalked through the room outside, sniffing and snarling. He know it was hunting for him. The boy's eyes widened and his heart began to pound as it came closer to the door.

Don't scream.

It stopped now. Will could hear its guttural breathing right outside the door. He shut his eyes and covered his mouth.

Please....

It howled, causing Will's body to tense up as he prepared for it to break the door down. To his relief, the creature turned and charged out of the room. The boy remained motionless for another moment until the creature's galloping footfalls faded into the distance. He uncovered his mouth and slowly exhaled.

He leaned against the back wall of the closet and sunk to the floor, bending his legs in front of him. He was exhausted. He didn't know how long it had been since he was snatched from his home and dropped into this world of darkness and decay, but he had been on the run ever since then. Sleep only came briefly, for a few minutes at best, before the creature's howls awoke him and spurred him to run. He had never felt weaker before in his life than he did now. It was getting harder to even get up and walk, let alone run. Even if he did muster up the strength to flee, breathing was becoming much more difficult. It was if his lungs were slowly filling up with some kind of liquid the longer he stayed in this place. His stomach hurt, his throat was bone-dry, he was constantly having periods of severe dizziness whenever he moved and the deep cold penetrated the clothes that

now clung loosely to his body with no respite.

As much as his body begged him to just lay down, Will never did. He didn't want to end up like the others. Not like the soldier who was ripped out of his hazmat suit, not like the men who were chased through the woods, not like the teenage girl who was dragged screaming into an empty pool.

He didn't want to die.

Will leaned his head back and closed his eyes. He thought of the last time he saw his mother; behind a murky, transparent window of flesh. He thought he was going saved from this horrible nightmare, until the creature came. But he still had hope, because his mom was coming for him. He had the feeling that Johnathon would dive into this world without a second thought to rescue him too.

Because brothers look out for each other.

A small smile came to Will's face as he tried to get some sleep. He was almost about to drift off when he heard a sound in the distance. His eyes opened as he strained his head to hear. His heart sank when he recognized the sound; footsteps.

It was coming back.

"No...." he whimpered, burying his head in his knees, "No...."

There was no escape from the closet as the footsteps got closer and closer until they stopped in front of the door. The boy curled up even tighter and squeezed his eyes shut as the doorknob turned. Will tried to think of his mom, brother and friends for comfort as he braced himself.

"William Byers."

Will cracked open one of his eyes. Did somebody just say his name?

He peeked out and to his utter shock, he found himself staring at a pair of black dress shoes and pants. His eyes slowly made their way up as he saw a suit, a black briefcase and finally the pale face of a man staring at him with an indifferent expression.

Scarcely believing his own eyes, Will only gave a feeble nod.

"It is a.... pleasure to meet you", the man said, with an odd, slow moroseness tone, "I feel the need to... congratulate you on your resourcefulness in surviving thus far."

Will blinked. Was this real? He remember reading somewhere that hallucinations could often arise from severe sleep deprivation. He uncurled slightly and gazed up at the man's face. Pale green eyes were staring back at him beneath a black crew cut set atop an angular face. The shape of the man's face reminded Will of Tarkin in *Star Wars*.

He could have sworn that the man's mouth slightly curled up in amusement when that thought came to mind.

"Who....?" Will started to mumble.

"That is not important at this time," the man slowly responded "what is important is your continued... survival, young Byers".

"If you'll excuse me for a moment..." he said as he began to turn around.

"No!" Will exclaimed as he quickly sat up. The ensuring wave of nausea forced him to lower his head again, "Don't leave..."

As unnerving as this man was, Will would rather he stay as opposed to being left alone again.

The man ignored him and stepped out of the closet. Will heard the sounds of a briefcase opening and closing. True to his word, the man reappeared in the doorway with a grey jar in his hand.

"My... employers have little interest in you, young Byers. They would rather you become simple... collateral damage," the man explained as he slowly opened the jar, "However, I admit, I have a fascination with those who adapt and survive against all odds. For a mere... child to survive being hunted for so long is impressive indeed."

He kneeled down and extended the jar to Will "....And I would not like to see a potential asset go to waste."

Will stared at the jar, barely comprehending what he was seeing and hearing. The man made a slightly amused smile.

"I know that your... mother must have warned you against taking food from strangers, but these are extraordinary circumstances, are they not?"

Will became alert. *Food!* He snatched the jar out of the man's hand and began shoveling the watery substance inside his mouth. It didn't have much taste, but to the starving boy it might as well have been ice cream. When he finished, he set the jar down and looked back at the man patiently watching him. Will suddenly realized how uncomfortably close he was.

"You may consider that an investment, young Byers. Your great potential ensures that we may have use for you in the future," the man said as he stood up and brushed dust off his suit.

Will didn't like the sound of that. "What use?"

"I am not at a... liberty to say, but I trust that you will keep the details of what you've experienced in this... place to yourself." the man said with a slight menace in his voice, "My employers are already taking a great risk in allowing me to invest in you, and they would be most... displeased if others are informed."

The man stared intently at Will, expecting an answer. The boy swallowed, "I... I will."

"Excellent," the man said as he turned to leave again, "If you'll excuse me, I must return to my... primary assignment."

"Wait!" Will yelled as he grabbed onto the man's leg, "Please... don't leave me here..." he begged as he looked up at the man with pleading eyes.

The man glanced down with an expression of mild annoyance. "Your test is not yet over", he stated as he kicked his leg out of the boy's grip, "But I will wish you luck, young Byers."

The man walked out the door and paused "...I would hate for my investments to be squandered."

He adjusted his tie and calmly walked away.

"No..." Will said, his eyes wide and his heart racing. He crawled out of the closet, ignoring the dizziness racking his head again. "Don't leave me! Please...."

He wildly looked around the hallway. But the man was gone.

"Please..." Will begged, with his eyes beginning to water, "Don't leave me..."

He lowered his head to the floor and began to quietly sob.

"Don't leave me..."

"Hey guys, don't leave me behind!"

"Sorry Will!"

It had been two weeks since Will was rescued from the other world. He had only just left the hospital a couple of days ago and was now trying to return to the semblance of a normal life. He wanted to block out that horrible week he spent in the "Upside-Down" (as his friends called it), but he couldn't. He couldn't forget running from a monster, couldn't forget the deaths, couldn't forget the bitter cold and the exhaustion, couldn't forget being dragged off and having a slug slither down his throat.

And he couldn't forget the man with the briefcase.

He wanted to tell his family and friends about that man and how the man saved his life by giving him food, but whenever he tried to, he remembered the man's veiled threat and lost the nerve. He didn't even think the man was human. So he lied to everyone and said that he didn't die of dehydration because he happened to have a water bottle with him when he was grabbed. No one questioned it.

Now, he was trying to convince everyone that everything was fine. Thus, on this chilly Saturday he was riding with Mike, Lucas and Dustin to the video rental place in town. Though Will felt rather weak from his experience and found it difficult to keep up with his

friends, he still tried to smile and keep up the façade.

Mike slowed his bike down so he was alongside Will, "We can slow down for you, Will."

"You don't have to do that."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm fine, really."

Mike watched his friend for a moment as if he was looking for something. Then he gave a mild shrug, "Alright, if you say so."

He didn't sound convinced.

Ever since he got back, Will noticed that his friend had changed as well. Dustin and Lucas were mostly the same as always, Mike had become a bit more withdrawn, and a bit less enthusiastic about most things. Normally he would take the lead on expeditions like this but now he was hanging back. Will knew the reason of course, and he almost wished that he didn't. Mike had told him all about Eleven, and how she saved his life. She even talked to him right before he was grabbed by the monster, but he was delirious at the time and didn't quite remember. She sacrificed herself to kill the monster, vanishing in a burst of light. Will had felt a ball of ice form in his stomach when he heard that part of the story, because he had the feeling that he knew where she was.

Or rather, who took her.

He remembered what the man had said about attending to his "primary assignment". He had the feeling that if a normal pre-teen kid had attracted the man's attention, than a girl who could kill people with her mind would probably be of great interest to the man and his "employers".

Mike appeared to be deep in thought as he quietly rode alongside his friend. Will saw everyday just how much losing El hurt his friend, and the guilt at withholding information about her fate was tearing him up inside. Will lied to keep him safe from the man, but he didn't like it.

Friends weren't supposed to lie to each other.

Thankfully, Mike never wanted to actually talk about El. He seemed to be dealing with it in his own way, alone.

"Mike, thanks for... well, everything."

"Huh?" Mike said, suddenly snapping out of his trance, "Oh... yeah, that's what friends are for, right?"

He tried to smile but ended up being more of a grimace. It took all of Will's restraint to not tell him that El may still be alive.

"Mike, I.... oh...."

Will suddenly felt pain in his stomach and filling his skull.

It was happening again.

Please, not now...

"Will...?" came a voice that sounded more like an echo.

With a flash of light Will was back in the Upside-Down. His bike was covered in fleshy vines, holding it to the ground. The buildings along the street were decayed and covered with the flesh. Spores rained from the black sky. Will shivered in the cold as he heard distant howling. He squeezed his eyes shut and willed himself to go back to the real Hawkins.

"Will, please wake up!"

Will opened his eyes to see the concerned faces of his friends surrounding him in a circle. He was lying on the pavement with his bike alongside him and blood seeping out of his elbow.

"Will, what the hell just happened?" Lucas demanded.

"Nothing..." Will feebly responded, as he sat up.

"You just zoned out and fell off your bike!" Mike yelled.

"I..." Will began as he tried to think of yet another lie. He shut his

mouth when he realized that he couldn't. He couldn't keep this up, he wanted to tell his friends everything about his appearances in the Upside-Down, the constant pain in his belly, Eleven, the man with the briefcase.

Right as he was about to tell them, something grabbed his attention. His gaze drifted to the space between Mike and Dustin and froze.

Pale green eyes were staring back.

Will blinked, hoping he would vanish, but he was still there. The man was down the street standing against the corner of a store, watching him with the same indifferent expression he had when Will met him. He was waiting.

"I..." Will began, as his resolve disappeared. He looked at the worried faces of his friends. "I think I just got dizzy again." He tried to smile, "I guess I should have listened to the doctor and waited a bit before getting on my bike. I think we should walk the rest of the way."

Mike was simply looked at him for a minute, before extending his hand. "If you say so."

"Thanks," Will responded as his friend pulled him to his feet. As he picked up his bike he glanced back down the street.

The man was gone.

Subject: Byers

Status: Primed

Awaiting Activation

2. Part 2

He stood before the portal.

Staff Sergeant Harold Shephard stared at the portal of pulsating flesh faintly illuminated by both his flashlight and those of his squad. He swallowed, bracing himself as one of his comrades tightened the chain rope attaching his hazmat suit to a winch.

"You boys hear me alright in there?" he asked.

"Loud and clear, Shephard," his CO responded from the control room.

"Good luck in there, son," the grey-haired scientist added.

Shephard took a deep breath. He heard the brittle black vines emanating from it crunch beneath his feet as he approached the portal. He stopped in front of it and watched the membrane rise and fall, as if it was a living creature. He cautiously extended his hand and slowly tore through the gooey membrane. He glanced back at his squad one last time before stepping through.

The portal seemed to cling to his suit when he emerged on the other side. He shook it off, and surveyed the area with his flashlight. The beam barely illuminated the pitch-black area he found himself in. His radio crackled.

"Shephard, come in, confirm comm."

The soldier looked back at the portal.

"Shephard, come in, confirm comm," his CO repeated.

Finally, he answered, "This is Shephard. Confirming, over."

"Shephard, where are you? Can you describe to us what you see? Over."

Shephard walked forward in the darkness, looking around the area, "I... I can't make out my location. It's hard to see..."

He was startled by a loud noise directly to his left. He hastily swung his flashlight in that direction, and saw nothing but a wall. He heard a scurrying noise behind him and turned around.

"Shephard? Do you copy? Shephard? Can you hear me?"

"There's...there's something else in here! There's something else in here!" the panicked soldier exclaimed. He heard the sound of guttural breathing right above his head. With a shaking hand he aimed his flashlight upwards to see a pale, lanky humanoid creature on the ceiling, watching him with a faceless head.

"Pull me out!" he screamed, "Pull me out, pull me out! Pull me out! Pull me out!"

"Reel him back in!" a voice yelled over his radio.

The creature dropped from the ceiling directly in front of Shephard, and grabbed him a vice-like grip. The chain strained against the added weight as the creature opened the flaps on its head and let out a thunderous roar. Its sharp teeth wrapped around Shephard's head and easily crushed the helmet, and began to crush his skull.

In that last, brief moment of intense pain, Staff Sergeant Harold Shephard's last thoughts were of his family.

"You're doing so well!"

A smiling woman sitting on the floor of her living room eagerly watched her very young son slowly waddle toward her. He had a look of determination in his blue eyes underneath his brown hair as he took one uneasy step after another. His mother beckoned encouragingly.

"Come on, you can do it!"

Finally, the boy reached his mother and fell into the arms of his mother, giggling. His mother beamed at him.

"Yay! I knew you could do it!"

She embraced her son with a warm smile. She was about to ask him to try and repeat the walk again when the doorbell rang. Still smiling, she gently set her son down and walked to the door.

Her smile faded when she opened it.

Two men in crisp military dress uniforms were standing on her doorstep with their caps in their hands and a solemn expression on their faces.

"Can I help you?" she asked, even though she knew and feared what was coming.

"I have been asked to inform you that your husband has been reported dead at approximately 0800 on November 10, 1983. Further information must remain classified in the interest of national security. On the behalf of the Secretary of Defense, I extend to you and your family my deepest sympathy in your great loss," one of the men recited as he extended a sealed envelope.

With shaking hands, Pamela Shephard slowly took the envelope. "Thank you..." she mumbled. She turned around and stumbled back into her living room in a daze. Her son was laughing as he played with a throw pillow on the floor. Swallowing, Pamela knelt down and hugged her son. Voice wavering and with her eyes beginning to water, she whispered;

"Daddy's not coming home."

The boy stared at the paper in front of him. There was only one question at the top;

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

The young boy tapped his pencil against his desk. He knew the answer, but he wasn't sure how he could explain it in a short paragraph. Sighing, he looked up at the clock at the front of the classroom; only ten minutes were left. He looked back down at his paper and placed his pencil to it. He thought for a moment, and began writing;

"When I grow up, I want to be a soldier. I want to become a soldier because of my dad. He died during a secret mission and I don't remember him. Mom said that he was a hero who died to protect our country. I want to be a hero and protect people like my dad did. I think he would like it."

Putting his pencil down, the boy looked over his paper. It looked like it might get at least a passing grade. He smiled and was about to get up to hand it in when a realization dawned on him; he forgot to put his name down. He quickly wrote his name at the top;

"Adrian Shephard"

"Go! Go! Go!"

Corporal Adrian Shephard sprinted across the starting line.

"Run up and over those platforms!" Drill Instructor Barnes yelled from the observation walkway, "Move! Move! Move!"

Shephard leapt over the small platforms and stumbled slightly on the landing, but he quickly recovered and charged down the hill toward the logs at the bottom.

"Duck, now jump! Get your sorry ass moving!" his instructor helpfully yelled as Shephard crouched under and vaulted over the obstacles in front of him. He ran forward, not even stopping to take a breath.

"Get your ass down that hill! Scale that wall!"

Shephard threw himself at the wall in front of him and began scurrying up the wooden planks affixed to it.

"Hurry it up! My dear sweet grandmother moves faster than you, dirt bag!"

Shephard gritted his teeth and pulled himself on top of the wall. He leapt off, bending his knees as he hit ground. Before him was a wooden board suspended over a moat of dirty water.

"Get over that beam!"

Shephard slowed his pace slightly to ensure that he wouldn't slip off the beam. When he reached the other side, he finally allowed himself to take a breath.

"I thought we were training soldiers here! Are you trying to embarrass me?!" Barnes yelled.

"No sir!" Shephard responded.

"Proceed to the next area! Come on, double time it, move, move, move!"

Shephard prepared himself as the gate in front of him opened. When it did, he ran through as fast as possible. On the other side he saw a wall with two ropes hanging from a support above it.

"Let's see if you can climb faster than you can run!" Barnes shouted, "Ready?"

"Yes, sir!"

The short barricade in front of him swung open and he clung to the rope. Quickly, he began to pull himself up, until he reached the top. Taking a brief second to survey the course, he jumped down back on to the ground.

"Very good, maybe there's hope for you yet! Now, want to come up here and try to knock me off?" Barnes taunted.

Shephard climbed another rope dangling through a hole in the platform above his head. He nodded to his unimpressed instructor when he reached the top. Bracing himself, he jumped off the platform, making sure to duck and roll when he hit the ground.

"You can definitely climb better than you can run! Now let's see if you can use these ropes for more than just climbing!"

Shephard climbed up the small hill onto a platform. Before him was a rope dangling from a support over another tub of murky water.

"Jump, catch that rope, and use your momentum to swing across that water!" Barnes ordered.

Backing up to take a running start, Shephard leapt off the platform and caught the rope, and winced as he felt the burn through his gloves. He quickly released his grip as it swung forward and landed on another platform. He groaned in annoyance when he saw that there were now two ropes hanging over a larger vat of water.

"This might take more coordination than you have, soldier! I want you to swing from rope to rope, and meet me at the end of the course!" Barnes shouted.

Once again taking a running start, Shephard jumped and grabbed onto the first rope, than released it as he swung over to the second. He let go of it and sailed through the air for a brief moment, before landing on the platform. With a small grin, he proceeded to the next gate.

"I'm almost impressed, soldier!" Barnes said from above, "Meet me in the next section and let's see if I can shake you up a bit!"

"Crap", Shephard muttered under his breath.

He walked through the gate and approached a wall with a climbing net overlaying it.

"You better move like you have a purpose!" Barnes warned, "Okay soldier, this is a live-fire exercise! This one will give you a taste of what it's like to be in the field! Keep your head low, and move between cover! I want to see your face in the dirt, soldier!"

"Crap," Shephard quietly repeated.

"Go, go, go!"

The soldier began rapidly ascending the wall.

"Climb that rope ladder, get your ass up there!"

Shephard charge over a small hill and approached a field of barbed wire over a mud pit.

"Hit the dirt soldier!"

The second Shephard threw himself to the ground, bullets began flying past. Grunting, he crawled through the mud and under the barbed wire, trying ignore the machine gun fire.

"Move it, move it, move it! Stay low! Keep your ass down!" Barnes screamed over the noise.

In this section, Shephard crawled amongst mounds of dirt as bullets whizzed by mere inches above his head and explosives went off in front of him. He was breathing hard when he reached a maze of sandbag walls. Finally, he reached crawled under the finish line and almost collapsed from exhaustion as the machine-gunners stopped firing.

Barnes walked down a stairway and stood over him, "Well, I'm impressed! You've managed to make it through my favorite training exercise in one piece!"

"Thank you, sir!" Shephard responded as he slowly stood up.

"Very good soldier, move on to your next phase of training!"

"Sir, yes, sir!" Shephard exclaimed as he made a quick salute. Turning away from his instructor, he sighed as he braced himself for whatever would come next in this grueling course.

HECU Marines were the best for a reason.

"Come in."

Shephard quietly shut the door behind him and snapped into a parade rest position in the small, cramped office. In front of him sat Captain Nichols behind a tidy desk. Shephard noted that the Captain was incredibly fit for a man in his mid-fifties as the Captain studied him with dark brown eyes under a graying buzz cut.

"Sir, Corporal Adrian Shephard reporting."

"At ease," the Captain said as he rose from his desk and extended his hand, "It's a pleasure to meet you."

A bit confused, Shephard gave it a firm shake "Likewise, sir."

"I saw your combat record. Your service in Afghanistan is commendable and I'm glad to have you in our Unit."

"Thank you, sir."

Nichols paused for a moment, "I understand that your father was part of this unit."

"That is correct, sir."

Nichols nodded solemnly, "He was a damn fine soldier."

"I'm told that he was, sir."

Shephard nervously shifted his feet. Nichols noticed, and smiled.

"Speak freely, Corporal."

Shephard allowed his shoulders to sag slightly as he relaxed, "Sir, what... what was my father like?"

"Harry was... well, he was one crazy son of a bitch." Nichols said with a chuckle, "When I met him, he was always the first to charge into some demonic hell-hole. I've never seen a man act so bravely and selflessly then he did. Saved my ass quite a few times, too."

The Captain sat down with a wistful look on his face "Of course, as he got older he mellowed out a bit, though that didn't stop him from performing his duty of protecting his country and willing to take on *anything* to keep his squad mates safe. However, I think he was about ready to leave when you were born."

He leaned back in his chair, lost in memories, "I remember when he passed a photo of you around the barracks a couple days after you were born, talking about how excited he was to meet you. I think it was the happiest I had ever seen him..."

Nichols gazed off into the distance and sighed, "... just as soon as his last term was up."

Shephard allowed his arms to drop as he grimaced, preparing to finally ask the question that he waited two decades to find the answer to;

"What happened to him?"

"Broken Phoenix happened," Nichols said grimly.

There was a brief, awkward pause. "Corporal, have you ever heard of an Indiana town called Hawkins?"

"I have not, sir."

"Of course you haven't," the Captain said bitterly, "For most people, it's just a small town a few hours' drive away from Indianapolis, completely insignificant in the grand scheme of things."

He shook his head, "For the HECU, it was the single biggest disaster zone we've ever deployed in."

Shephard raised an eyebrow, "Sir?"

Nichols took a long, forlorn breath, "Hawkins was the site of a government research lab. On the surface, it was a normal Department of Energy lab conducting nuclear and high-energy research. Secretly, however, it had also been conducting research into mind control, psychic abilities and other such crap ever since the plug was pulled on Brookhaven."

"While all of those idiots were fucking around, they screwed up. Somehow they opened some kind of portal to another dimension and some... *thing* crawled out."

Nichols sighed again, "That's when we got the call."

"There were two HVTs; designated Hecate and Cerberus. Hecate was one of the kids those sick bastards were testing for psychic abilities. She slipped out in the confusion and went rogue, but she wasn't our problem at first. A whole bunch of CIA spooks showed up to 'apprehend' her."

The Captain snorted, "'Course, they fucked that up almost

immediately, but I digress."

"Our target was Cerberus, and dear God... let me tell you something Corporal, we all thought that our worse adversary was the Air Force's 'specimen' that kicked our ass in Ohio. Then we met this *thing*. I don't know what circle of Hell it crawled out of, but it was tough, quick and deadly. It was too fast to hit as it darted around trees in the dark and if by some miracle we did manage to land a shot, it just shrugged it off. It tore us apart when we went into the woods to hunt it down."

Shephard frowned, "Is that how my father died?"

Nichols studied him with a blank expression for a moment, then shook his head, "No. He walked into that thing's house."

"He..." Shephard began.

"The bastard who was running the whole facility wanted to send someone into the portal to 'analyze the creature's natural habitat'. Typical." Nichols spat. "A goddamn spook with a speech impediment pointed Harry out as a recommendation for the assignment. So, the scientist ordered him to enter the portal."

Nichols slowly clenched his hand into a fist, "Command thought that it would be best if the 'experts' were put in charge of the operation. So this old jackass ordered Harry to put on a hazmat suit and just stroll in, alone and armed with nothing but a shitty flashlight. He didn't refuse. He knew someone else would do it if he didn't."

"I attached him to a winch, and then he just walked into the dark fleshy portal. We heard him screaming shortly after. I tried to pull him back in, but all that came back was a bloody piece of his suit."

Shephard looked down at the floor with a pensive expression. His posture wavered slightly.

"I'm sorry." Nichols quietly said, "I served with your father for nearly twenty years, fighting side-by-side with him against every possible nightmare you could dream up in every corner of the globe. He didn't deserve that. He was a remarkable soldier, one of the best the HECU ever had... and he was a good friend."

Shephard looked back at the Captain, nodding. He cleared his throat, "What happened after that?"

Nichols leaned back in his chair, hands folded in front of him, "After that, our CO refused to allow anyone else to enter. We locked down the site, but apparently another portal had opened up in the nearby woods, because civilians kept going missing. So we went in after Cerberus, and walked into a trap."

"It only came out at night, so we had to search for it with only the sliver of a crescent moon and flashlights affixed to our rifles that barely illuminated the area in front of us. We formed a standard search-and-sweep line; and proceeded slowly through the brush, M16s at the ready. Somehow, Cerberus got behind us. I remember hearing a guy down the line suddenly fire, and then scream as the thing tore it him. We all turned to face his direction, and in less than second we heard another scream, coming from the left end. It was surrounding us and picking us off. We all backed into a clump together, swinging our rifles around manically, trying desperately to spot it. We should have been looking up. The thing jumped down on us from the trees, roaring as it ripped my buddies' stomachs open and in some cases just flat-out decapitated them. I remember just firing wildly around, spraying bullets all over the place as it leaped among the trees under the sound of the entire platoon unloading on it and Lieutenant Dixon screaming out orders. It eventually went away, but not before dragging off Bailey, alive. I remember his screams fading off into the distance as we abandoned him in our retreat.

The old Captain slowly closed his eyes, "In one night, nearly all of our platoon was killed."

"After that, we put in a request for flamethrowers and air support, but we were denied because the old jackass and a couple of spineless bureaucrats wanted to keep everything low-profile. So that meant nothing too lethal and all the guys locking down the labs had to wear MP uniforms to blend in better, which offered next to nothing by way of protection. So we ended up just forming a perimeter. Not a secure perimeter, mind you, as we were ordered to just allow any idiot civvie to wander in and get themselves killed in those woods, because I guess if a couple of armed special forces marines jumped out of a bush and told them to leave, it would 'arouse suspicion'."

"Meanwhile the spooks were running around town trying to cover all the disappearances up and leading the local police on a wild goose chase. They were damn good at the former task, I'll give them that; they managed to make a realistic dummy of a missing kid in a less than a day based on nothing more than school photos, dental records and the grainy security footage from a gas station the kid passed by the night he vanished."

"Though of course, when it came time to pull that thing out of the dirty, polluted quarry they dumped it in, they made a couple of HECU boys slap on state trooper uniforms and wade into that muck to fish it out," Nichols added, rolling his eyes, "Because God forbid the suits get their feet wet when there's a whole bunch of leathernecks on hand to do it for them."

"So after a week of this, do you know what happened?"

"No, sir."

"Well, we finally got air support," Nichols said with a grimace, "Or to be more accurate, the spooks got Black Hawks because they still hadn't located Hecate and the old jackass thought she was a bigger priority than the hell-beast dragging people off into the woods. Christ, we should have just dumped napalm over those trees and been done with it."

The Captain angrily shook his head, "That's the reason why we never take orders directly from a civvie now."

"Anyway, so the girl had spent the week hiding out from America's most prestigious intelligence agencies in the basement of a preteen kid, and they fled from armed federal agents on bicycles."

Nichols slowly clapped his hands, "Bang-up job CIA. No wonder you guys were never able to take out Castro."

"Now, I have no idea what that kid was capable of but I guess she did something to scare the spooks, because they finally decided to swallow their pride and call in the people who knew what they were doing. By this point, I guess Command sobered up and decided to finally override the old jackass and gave us clearance to use any

means necessary to remove the threat. So we redeployed to the school where Hecate and friends were hiding and pulled out all the stops; flamethrowers, bazookas, heavy machine guns and to top it all off a squad of Thunderbolts standing by at Fort Wayne, fueled and ready to level the school in case things got out of hand. The rest of the spooks and the guys we left at the labs were already inside the building, engaging none other than old Cerberus himself. We were about to breach the building and charge in guns-blazing when one of the classrooms practically exploded."

Nichols grimaced again "It turns out that Hecate and Cerberus neutralized each other. Must have been one hell of a kid."

"After accidentally flash-banging the kids that were assisting Hecate when we breached the room, we went through standard cleanup procedures and cover ups. I don't know how much the spooks lost, but I do know that we lost forty-two of some of the best warriors in the United States military during Operation Broken Phoenix, the worst causality rate the HECU has ever suffered," Nichols bowed his head slightly, "Though the world may never know their sacrifice, they will always be remembered by their brothers-in-arms, your father included, Corporal."

"So... was that the end of it?" Shephard asked, intrigued by the story.

Nichols sighed, "No... it turns out that wasn't the end of it after all. We had to go back to that hellhole the next year, and..."

The Captain stopped, and stared down at the papers on his desk, "Well... if you'll forgive me, Corporal, that's something I'd rather not relive. All I'll say is that even though the Hazardous Environment Combat Unit has gotten into a lot of hairy situations fighting every threat you can think of since 1942, we've never gotten closer to recommending that the Hammer Down Protocol be enacted than we did that night in October of '84. If it hadn't been for a literal miracle at the last second, Hawkins would be nothing more than a radioactive crater today."

There was another silence, broken only by the distant hum of a helicopter's blades as it landed in the nearby air field. Nichols shuffled his papers together, sighed and looked up at the expectant

face of Adrian Shephard.

"Shephard, the life of a HECU marine isn't glorious; you'll never be thanked or even recognized for your bravery and sacrifice. But know that we are the first line of defense against the things that aren't supposed to exist so our families and countrymen could sleep soundly in their beds while the monsters are kept trapped in the closet. You will be tested to your absolute limits and will be confronted by hostiles we do not fully understand, but mean to do us harm. You will be expected to meet them head-on and lay down your life if necessary to safeguard your country and your planet. Are you prepared to shoulder these responsibilities?"

Shephard snapped his feet together and straightened his posture, "Sir, yes, sir!"

Nichols smiled, "Your dad would be proud."

"I won't disappoint him, sir."

"Good man," Nichols said as he opened a drawer under his desk, "now, before I dismiss you, there's something I want to give you... ah, here it is."

He pulled out a small, worn patch and extended it to Shephard, "This was your father's patch, and I think you should have it."

A bit hesitantly, Shephard slowly took patch. The somewhat faded image was of a grinning white skull with a serrated combat knife between its teeth. Above it were the letters **H.E.C.U.** written in gold, and below it was the phrase **SEMPER VIGILANS**. Shephard stared down at the patch for a long minute in silence, feeling a mixture of awe and sadness washing over him.

"You are dismissed, Corporal."

Shephard snapped out of his trance and immediately saluted the Captain, "Thank you, sir!"

He did an about-face and left the room, clutching the old patch close as he shut the door.

As he walked across the parade field under the golden desert sky of a setting sun, he didn't notice the suited man with a briefcase watching him from a window.

He stood before the portal.

Corporal Adrian Shephard stared at the purple portal surrounded by green organic material pulsating in front of him. It was blocking off his escape route out of the doomed Black Mesa Research Facility.

Shephard had spent the last day constantly fighting the alien invaders accidentally summoned by the research staff and his PCV was soaked in blood. Most of HECU had already pulled out, leaving the rest of the facility to be cleaned up by Black Ops units and a nuclear warhead. Shephard only had minutes left until it went off.

As he was thinking of a way to get around the portal, he heard a massive roar, coming from within. Instinctively raising his rifle, he aimed at the entryway. Four massive tentacles reached out and planted themselves against the edge of the portal.

"Shit," Shephard muttered as he moved behind a nearby pillar for cover. He peek around as the tentacles pulled a massive, withering green body capped by a hard shell out of the portal, groaning and screeching as it pulled through. The HECU marine shook his head in exasperation. He had killed dozens of creatures from another dimension already, but this thing was the size of a three story building. He knew he couldn't win, and he sighed in defeat. He took off his gas mask and breathed freely for the first time in days. He leaned against the wall, and closed his eyes, waiting for the nuke to go off.

Then a nagging memory came to his mind.

Your dad would be proud.

Shephard fished around inside his breast pocket and pulled out his father's patch. Staring into the eyes of the skull, he scowled. This wasn't how he envisioned his death; standing around waiting to be incinerated with nothing but a monster from another dimension to

accompany him after such a long and vicious fight for survival. Then again, he doubted that his father expected to die alone in a cold, dark world with his brothers-in-arms unable to aid him.

Shephard peeked around the corner at the massive creature groaning as it pulled itself out of the portal. He turned his gaze back to the old patch. A determined feeling suddenly came over him.

I think I know what he would have wanted.

HECU Marines were the best for a reason.

He smiled as he put the patch back in his breast pocket and reattached his mask. He took a breath and shoulder-rolled around the pillar. The behemoth let out an earth-shaking roar when it sighted the lone soldier in his way. Shephard calmly loaded a fresh magazine into his rifle. He looked up at the ceiling and grinned.

"This is for you, dad!"

He raised the rifle up, and pulled the trigger.

Subject: Shephard

Status: Detained

Further Evaluation Pending.